



## Modernism Comes to the Cabbage Patch: Bill Forsyth and the "Scottish Cinema"

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# Modernism Comes to the Cabbage Patch

## BILL FORSYTH AND THE "SCOTTISH CINEMA"

In 1982 there was an event at the Edinburgh International Film Festival called *Scotch Reels*. It was intended as an inspection of the representations of Scotland in film, and an attempt to create an historical/critical context out of which might emerge a Scottish cinema. Given the Left political orientation of the EIFF staff and others involved in putting together *Scotch Reels*, a "progressive" cinema was being proposed, in opposition to the dominant modes of South Britain (so to speak) and, looming rather vaguely behind that, Hollywood. The event and the book that came out of it (*Scotch Reels*, London: BFI, 1982) have succeeded, for better or worse, in establishing the critical parameters within which much of the serious discussion of Scottish film culture takes place. At the same time, the films of Bill Forsyth—*That Sinking Feeling* (1979), *Gregory's Girl* (1980), *Local Hero* (1982), *Comfort and Joy* (1984)—have been the most popular and most widely distributed representations of the current Scottish cinema; to a large extent his work has proven that distinctly Scottish films can be commercially viable. Indeed, it is their "Scottishness" that reviewers often fall back on in trying to explain the appeal of Forsyth's anarchically funny, subtly wise films. This is unfair to Forsyth; his brilliant, and brilliantly cinematic, sense of humor is not an easy by-product of being Scottish. In any case, his crucial place in the development of Scottish film has given him a considerable burden of cultural responsibility—hence his importance to the *Scotch Reels* project.

Broadly, the *Scotch Reels* event sought to establish: (1) that filmic representations of Scotland had generally fallen into two "frozen discourses" labelled Tartanry and Kailyard; (2) that these discourses have perpetuated a representation of Scotland as politically and culturally irrelevant; (3) that a debate is needed to discover how these discourses might be

overcome by progressive (Left) modes of cinematic representation.

Tartanry and Kailyard, usually slurred together in critical practice, are a convenient summation of a few hundred years of Scottish literature evolving into Scottish film—from *Waverley* to *Brigadoon* and beyond. Tartanry is descended from the work of Sir Walter Scott, specifically the romantic historical novels set in the uneasy period when Scotland was settling into union with England; the key historical event of Tartanry is the disastrous 1745 uprising of the Highlanders against the English king, and the key figure that of the failed Pretender to the throne, Bonnie Prince Charlie. The political discourse of Tartanry is based on a mythicized past of brave but unsuccessful heroes. Because it is mythic and past, the argument goes, it suggests a present of diminished capacity where political power and cultural greatness are historicized and thereby made inaccessible. The fact that the historical events concerned ran against the tide of history lends an added measure of impotence. The cultural manifestations of Tartanry range from Scott's novels to Scott's Porridge Oats boxes to films like *Rob Roy the Highland Rogue* and *The Master of Ballantrae*.

The chief literary origin of Kailyard was J. M. Barrie; the particular source cited by Cairns Craig in the first essay of *Scotch Reels* is *Auld Licht Idylls* (1888). Kailyard means "cabbage patch," and the Kailyard discourse is strongly parochial, concerned only with its own cabbage patch. Craig describes Kailyard Scotland, hemmed in by Calvinist prohibitions and small-town narrow-mindedness, as "a world of grotesquely impoverished human potential." Kailyard is humorous in that the joke is the sheer "couthiness" and parochialism of its subjects, who are being laughed at, in this case, by Scot-turned-London-sophisticate Barrie. The two most frequently cited examples of Kailyard in film

are the Mackendrick films *Whisky Galore* (distributed in the US as *Tight Little Island*) and *The Maggie*.

Although Tartanry and Kailyard are in many respects opposite—Highland Romanticism versus Lowland Calvinism—they are united in that they reinforce Scotland's cultural and political inferiority, notably to England, and create a political self-image that is fundamentally impotent.

Tartanry and Kailyard, seemingly so opposite in their ethos, are the joint creations of an imagination which, in recoil from the apparently featureless integration of Scottish life into an industrial culture whose power and identity lies outside Scottish control, acknowledges its own inability to lay hold of contemporary reality by projecting itself upon images of a society equally impotent before the forces of history.<sup>1</sup>

This backward-looking combination of Tartanry and Kailyard leads to a certain poverty of the cultural imagination. Scotland, the argument goes, is unable to influence its own fate.

But the forces which carry us forward are, literally, *unimaginable*, and the imagination has no choice but to find a secure location for itself in a past divorced from the present. The present, therefore, is lost to us: like sleep walkers we glide on the surface of life's deeps.<sup>2</sup>

It is likely that Tartanry and Kailyard are too convenient to be precise terms. The fact that they are so often used together suggests that, as a unit, they represent a little more than the sum of their parts. One writer on Scottish film has gone so far as to call them simply T/K. Taken together, they represent a tradition that is consistently self-diminishing, if not self-lacerating: a cultural tradition that dwells on its own parochialism, and a political tradition that dwells on its failures.

The class analysis of this cultural/political situation that *Scotch Reels* offers runs as follows: the union with England and its aftermath served primarily the desire of the Scottish bourgeoisie for advancement. The idea was that the best trade relations, as well as such slightly less tangible gains as social status for emergent bourgeois, would come through a firm political union. As it turned out, the bourgeoisie's identity was itself sacrificed, as well as Scottish nationhood. For the ambitious bourgeois, it was Scottishness as well as Scotland that had to go. Scots benefitted

from union with England only when they ceased to be Scots. If Scots wanted to succeed they had to go south, trying to lose their accent along the way. The crushing of the 1745 uprising was the military finale to an economic and cultural drain that had begun in the previous century. Scotland could be looked back on fondly, in time-honored, time-bound "Auld Lang Syne" fashion; but it was not a place to be, to live and work. Thus the cultural discourses of Tartanry and Kailyard eased the abandonment of Scotland, ensuring alternately the romantic mistiness (Tartanry) or parochial backwardness (Kailyard) of the Scottish past, and the irrelevance of the Scottish present.

The progressive alternative offered by *Scotch Reels* is: (1) to recover the lost history of the Scottish working class (implicitly the Real Scotland), and (2) to figure out a progressive program for present and future cultural production that will move Scotland out of its bourgeois-constructed present of irrelevancy and Anglophilia and into a self-determined, socialist future. The first imperative is straightforward enough: the *Scotch Reels* articles by Douglas Allen and John Hill are efforts in this direction. The second imperative is a bit more complicated.

The theory is that Tartanry and Kailyard keep the working class down through impoverishing the imagination. They deprive the working class of any national (or nationalist) discourse within which they might imagine a future where they could exercise power or control over their lives. However, both discourses are quite popular with their victims: the Kailyardish *Whisky Galore* has long been a favorite, particularly in the Highlands, and that pillar of political regressiveness and country couthiness *The Sunday Post* enjoys a huge circulation. The problem here is a familiar one in theories of ideology: the incorporation by the oppressed of the cultural discourses of the oppressors. The difficulties posed by this notion vary with whether one spreads it with a spade or a butter knife. Tending to the former, the *Scotch Reels* writers and speakers face the question: where, if the working class is so thoroughly infused with bourgeois discourse(s), is the alternative to come from? After all, if one accepts that the Scottish working class has been poisoned from above,

then the alternative might also come from above—not surprisingly, the Scotch Reels writers generally, and in particular their chief theorist Tom Nairn, place great value on the role of intellectuals. However, in the film-intellectual quest for ever more political sophistication the working class seems likely to get left behind. It is doubtful whether any number of Scottish Straubs or Wollens or Snows—the ideals for Scottish cinema held up by Scotch Reels organizer Colin MacArthur—would be able to pry the cherished *Sunday Posts* from working-class hands. On the other hand, if one accepts that the working class has an active hand in determining its own culture, things get murky fast. One ends up talking about “compromise,” and “progressive naturalism”—that is, the uncertain middle ground that most of us inhabit, between the present and the Revolution.

Which brings us, after some necessary distance, to Bill Forsyth. With one exception that I know of (Michael Radford's *Another Time, Another Place*), Forsyth's films are the only representatives of the “new Scottish cinema” distributed outside Britain. Within Scotland, he is certainly The Name associated with indigenous film-making. His films do not reclaim working-class history, nor do they attempt to impose or even suggest any program of Scottish political or cultural redemption. His work has not found favor with the Scotch Reels circle. What I want to do here is make a case for the value of Forsyth's vision of Scotland, and to assess its weaknesses. (All quoted material, unless otherwise attributed, is from an interview I did with Forsyth in July 1984.)

Specifically along the lines of Tartanry/Kailyard, critical attention has focussed on *Local Hero*. The plot synopsis strongly resembles that of *The Maggie*: an American oilman (Burt Lancaster) wants to buy up a beautiful Scottish village in order to build an oil refinery; he is eventually persuaded by a canny beachcomber (Fulton MacKay) to instead make the area a natural preserve. The chief interest of the film is that it is a sustained and extremely funny undercutting of virtually the entire range of couthy Kailyard clichés. Colin MacArthur in *Scotch Reels* expressed concern that *Local Hero* was too near the “elephant traps” of the old discourse. What

the film does is jump in and out of the traps, laughing and dancing. The black parish minister, the punkette at the *ceilidh*, the eagerness of the natives to sell out to the oil company, the urbane sophistication of the village innkeeper—all of these combine, notably at the level of characterization, to turn the Kailyard tradition on its head.

However, it remains true that the broader narrative repeats the Kailyard strategy of leaving the Scots in a kind of twilit irrelevance. The real problems posed by the oil company's designs on the village are resolved by the fantastic plot device of the natural preserve—which, as it happens, is a pretty good metaphor for the timeless sylvan marginality in which both Tartanry and Kailyard seek to leave the Scottish countryside. This disparity between the discrete elements of the film and its broader narrative occurs in all of Forsyth's films. Or, to put it differently, the oppositions and contradictions that are explored at the level of characters, incidents and lines of dialogue give way to misty, dream-like narrative “resolutions.” *Local Hero* dismantles many of the Kailyard clichés, yet ultimately serves some of the main purposes of that “frozen discourse.”

*That Sinking Feeling* shows, in bitterly funny detail, the impoverished lives of a group of unemployed teenagers. Forsyth's ensemble of acned losers all desperately need a way out of Glasgow's arid council-housing blocks; one of the film's funniest scenes has a teenage boy struggling in vain to drown himself in a bowl of cornflakes. The scheme that this group of friends finally settles on is a Big Heist of kitchen sinks (“ill-gotten drains”), a stratagem only slightly more likely than the breakfast-cereal suicide. But *That Sinking Feeling* is more than a send-up of heist films. Its urban-wasteland locations and genuinely tragic characters make the film more ironic than parodic. The intercut shots of tower blocks at sunset are suffused with over-rich color, a jolting visual commentary on the drab lives being played out in the film.

*Gregory's Girl* takes place in one of Glasgow's “new towns,” slightly upscale from the setting of *That Sinking Feeling*. It is about the efforts of Gregory, a transcendently gawky teenager, to understand women. It is a gentler, somewhat less inventive film than *That Sink-*

GREGORY'S  
GIRL



*ing Feeling*, made with a higher budget and a much better script. Here, again, Forsyth plays off a familiar genre in creating a very original film.

However, as in *Local Hero*, the momentary insights in Forsyth's first two films dissolve into vague "resolutions." The success of the kitchen-sink heist in *That Sinking Feeling* creates a perfunctory and rather unsatisfying ending. In *Gregory's Girl* the main character's earnest attempts to comprehend women collapse into a kind of magical haziness in the final sequence, when he is shuffled along, utterly passive, by a series of dates who seem to be linked in a benevolent conspiracy to keep him confused. One could make an argument that Forsyth is abdicating political responsibility by letting the contradictions explored glancingly at the level of character or incident fade away before any generalization can be achieved. He has admitted as much—that he is not concerned with politics in making films, but simply with characters and situations. But if theories of ideology have taught us anything it is that one can be guilty by omission, and that "political neutrality" usually serves to further the dominant discourses (or version of what is reality, naturalness, etc.).

I will return to this argument a bit later. First, it is important to look at the very consciously anti-conventional aspects of Forsyth's style.

The way that I go about making films is a reaction against what you could call the traditional English dramatically structured film, and also, especially, the English form of film acting. So I suppose I'm quite openly reacting against that. I'm doing that because of the relationship that Scotland has had with England. I suppose it's that inferiority that we feel, the Scots people, vis-à-vis England.

It is noteworthy that opposition to convention is articulated in terms of opposition to English domination. England/Scotland is a basic organizing conflict, in Forsyth's work as in much of Scottish culture (hence the preoccupation of the Scottish Left with nationalism). Particularly relevant to Forsyth's films is the linear, rigidly organized style of comedy associated with the old Ealing studios. However, given the similarities between English and other film traditions, one wonders if the England/Scotland opposition isn't, in Forsyth's case, a localized expression for what is in fact a more general rejection of norms.

In his revolt against traditional filmic drama Forsyth indulges only the most frail of story lines, on which he places the occasionally

quite arbitrary incidents that make up the film. Indeed it is this arbitrariness that creates some of the funniest moments, e.g., the choice of kitchen sinks as quarry in *That Sinking Feeling*, the lying-down dance scene in *Gregory's Girl*, the appearances of the rabbit in *Local Hero*, or the dentist scene in *Comfort and Joy*. The relative directionlessness of Forsyth's narratives is paralleled by the relationships between his characters. Communication between his primary (usually male) characters and the secondary characters seems always to be a great effort, as if they were all trapped in the thick moorland fog that Danny and Mac spend the night in in *Local Hero*. This difficulty of communication is relieved only in momentary connections, never conclusively—which may explain why Forsyth's films seem not to end, even though the slender plots are usually given slender resolutions. Taken together, these features constitute a style that is some distance from "the traditional English dramatically structured film."

However, the conventional narrative is not replaced by anything. Despite the formal linkages elucidated by John Brown (*Sight and Sound*, Winter 1983-84), there is no significant structuring principle used, except in that the avoidance of conventional narrative is itself a structuring principle.

Really, I suppose the films boil down just to a collection of moments which may give the audience a certain amount of insight into either a character or a situation or a place or various degrees of each of them. And that's about all that I would want anyone to get from a film that I've made.

To use the Scotch Reels language, Forsyth undercuts the familiar discourses but he doesn't interrogate them—for to interrogate one must have a principle of interrogation, a line of questioning, if not a clear goal. The characters in his films seem very much, as in Cairns Craig's description of the Scots, to "glide on the surface of life's deeps." Forsyth has said that his style of film-making seems to him to be more reflective of "real life" than conventional narrative. To some extent the marginality that Forsyth's characters inhabit, relieved only by irony, fantasy and the chance communication, reflects a pervasive Scottish state of mind.

*Comfort and Joy* is the most pared-down



COMFORT AND JOY

portrayal of this marginality, which may be why I found it the least funny of the four films. The exclusive concentration on one character, a Glasgow disc jockey on a morning happy-talk program (Bill Paterson), is a departure from the earlier films. There is hardly a frame in which the main character is not present. The result is a much sparser film, one in which the meaninglessness of the character's life is amplified because it is not diffused by the significant presence of other characters. The central plot device is the disc jockey's attempt to end a running battle between rival ice-cream vending companies. "The silliness of conflict" is the main theme. Its furthest political extension comes in the world news bulletins that are played over sections of the film. As you listen closely to these bulletins you realize that the international crises that are being announced are between imaginary countries with Third Worldish names.

The way that we perceive the world now, the world has almost become a fictional place. I bet the average audience would have to think twice about whether these countries were fictional or not. . . . It was the idea that we receive all this news about the world and it could be fiction for all half of us know.

One implication of this almost Orwellian view is that Forsyth's Scotland is extremely distant from the serious world of political conflict. The perceived political marginality of Scotland is the (unmentioned) context of *Comfort and Joy*; within that context, all conflict takes on a trivial cast. Conflict becomes a joke because it is merely banal.

So his whole life seems to be contained in this level of banality. And that for me was the big



COMFORT AND JOY: *The villains about to attack Mr. Bunny's workshop*

joke in the film, that was the joke that lasted from the beginning to the end of the film. Anything else in the film was incidental to that.

However, political marginality is not a condition peculiar to Scotland. The lives of Forsyth's trivialized characters may be the modern experience par excellence. Having dismantled to varying degrees the clichéd discourses in which his characters might otherwise, in cinema, have acted, Forsyth leaves them in a discursive vacuum, in the same arbitrary way that the disc jockey's lover leaves him at the beginning of *Comfort and Joy*. The "normal" locus of social validation, work, is almost completely absent from Forsyth's films (as, of course, it is absent from the lives of Britain's 4 million or so unemployed). When work is shown in his films, it is usually either silly (happy-talk radio) or mad (the star-gazing oilman in *Local Hero*). But Forsyth's characters are alienated not only from the production of things, but from the (re)production of cultural meaning. They are deprived even of the structures of representation that had reproduced Scottish marginality. Freed from Tartanry and Kailyard, Forsyth's Scots are left with very little to do.

Colin MacArthur wrote that Scotland's film institutions "failed to keep a historic appointment with the discourses of marxism and modernism." It is certainly true that, in Forsyth's work (a Scottish film institution of

sorts), Marxism makes no appearance. His Scotland is essentially classless. Although some characters are wealthier than others, no one seems to have power over anyone else. They are all Scots and therefore all powerless; power lies elsewhere. In *Local Hero*, power is located in the crazed isolation of Houston skyscrapers. In the other films it is, for the most part, simply absent. In *Comfort and Joy*, the assertion of power is rendered absurd. Powerlessness is central to Forsyth's vision of Scotland. This can be seen as politically regressive because his films do nothing to reveal the relations that create, and perpetuate, Scottish powerlessness. What Forsyth's films do offer is a dramatically unconventional, unsystematically critical, and very funny representation of life in the margin. If, in general, his films ease rather than sharpen the contradictions of that life—which is admittedly what Tartanry and Kailyard do, though in a much different way—that is not always a bad thing. After all, as capital continues to contract, we are, most of us, also being placed in the margins. Forsyth's rich irony at least eases the pain of that forced "irrelevance."

## NOTES

1. Cairns Craig, "Myths Against History: Tartanry and Kailyard in 19th-Century Scottish Literature," in *Scotch Reels*, p. 13.
2. Ibid.